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CIA Monitored Private Mail to and From Russia for 20 Years

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During a 20-year period beginning in 1953, the postal service cooperated with the CIA in an illegal mail-opening operation concentrated on mail between the United States and communist countries, according to House testimony made public today. Chief Postal Inspector William J. Cotter outlined to the House civil liberties subcommittee last Tuesday the details behind a Central Intelligence Agency mail surveillance project that inspected mail going to and from the Soviet Union and China, among other countries, between 1953 and 1973.

Cotter said he ended the project shortly thereafter.

He said former Postmaster General Winton Blount and former Atty. Gen. John N. Mitchell, who both served in the Nixon administration, knew about the clandestine mail surveillance operation.

HE DID not know who else was aware of the mail-opening operation which took place at Kennedy International Airport in New York and in San Francisco. But he expressed the belief that every president going back to Dwight D. Eisenhower was "aware of this activity conducted by the CIA."

Under the law, first class mail cannot be opened by any government agency without a court search and seizure order.

Cotter, who was a CIA official at the time the mail-opening began in 1953, said that he made continual efforts to try to stop the project when he became the Postal Services' chief postal inspector.

"I was pushing to get rid of the project," Cotter said. He said he went to then-CIA Director Richard Helms in 1971 and told him "Either get exceedingly high approval for this project, or discontinue the project."

COTTER said Blount called him three days later and told him to "carry on with the project" and that Mitchell "at that time . . . was briefed and thought . . . the project was fine."

Cotter said that the CIA was instructed not to open or remove the letters from the postal premises on which they were examined but explained that the CIA "without the concurrence of the postal people . . . surreptitiously appropriated some letters and opened the letter."

Cotter said it was his opinion that

the mail openings were illegal. But he said "there was no domestic mail involved . . . it was strictly foreign."

Cotter said that former Postmasters General Arthur Summerfield and Edward Day were "apprised . . . that they were recording the cut-sides and taking photographs (of the mail covers), but did not know to what extent they were informed on the project."

A COVER operation — in which the outside of first class mail is monitored and recorded without the letters being read — is a legally permissible operation under postal operations and may be conducted without court approval.

Cotter said he knew of the mail-opening in his capacity as an assistant CIA agent in the early 1950's.

He said the CIA activity was suspended in 1973 and to his knowledge has not been resumed.

Cotter said the San Francisco operation monitored incoming mail from China because the CIA was interested in the development of atomic energy by the Communist Chinese. He said the mail surveillance at Kennedy Airport also involved "access to some Cuban mail."

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